

Trip report: Poland September 2021, Jonathan Ben Simon and Uri Wolkowski

Written by Jonathan Ben Simon



Disclaimer: this trip report has been written more than a year after the trip; some details may not be complete.

I remember that since I read about the once extinct in the wild European bison, I always dreamt about going to Białowieża forest to find them. Since this is a quite a cheap option in terms of accommodation and flights from Israel (suitable for students...) I suggested a trip to my friend, and we decided we will fly in September 2019.

General itinerary: Warsaw-> Białowieża Forest->Biebrza National Park-> Baltic coast-> Warsaw.

Guide: we hired a local guide for 5 days (of 14 days); his name is [Oliwier Myka](#). He is such an amazing guide! He is young, knowledgeable, and kind; he will take you to all the best secret off-trail spots to find your target species. I recommend him for any kind of wildlife trip in Poland- mammals, birds, or even reptiles (but beware there are only ~10 species).

We also used the very detailed (yet not so updated) Białowieża and Biebrza site guides books.

Birding: We love birding! And we recorded every bird we saw; however, I didn't elaborate on the birding much here since we have everything on eBird, here is a link for all the checklists: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/11231>.

Warsaw, 13-14 Sep:

We landed in Poland on the 13th and went to the [geological museum](#) which was a nice museum with impressive fossils. On the way to the in a city garden museum we found the first mammal of the trip- a striped field mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*). During the afternoon we went to Łazienki Park which is probably the best spot for urban wildlife in the middle of Warsaw. We saw many red squirrels (*Scirus vulgaris*) and striped field mice. We stayed till nightfall and then we saw 2 northern white-breasted hedgehogs (*Erinaceus roumanicus*).



On the 14th we started the day at Łazienki Park for birding and there were more squirrels than birds, then we went to the [evolution museum](#) and the [museum of the earth](#) which were also nice. We went to get our rental car which was a brand-new Kia Ceed and we drove to Białowieża forest. The way was longer than we anticipated since google maps were unaware of some road closures but we managed to get there. Since of refugee crisis the border with Belarus area was closed for tourists so we couldn't go to Białowieża town, instead we stayed in Hajnowka, we stayed 6 nights at Agroturystyka Przylesie which was very nice.

Białowieża Forest, 15-20 Sep:

We were super excited to go out with dawn for our first experience with this amazing primeval forest, and nothing prepared us for the amazing beginning of the trip. After only 20 minutes of driving from Hajnowka to the area of Budy, I saw this huge brown cow standing between the village and the forest- a bison (*Bison bonasus*) bull!!!



This amazing bull gave us an amazing observation of 10~ minutes while it was busy eating, then it disappeared into the forest. The fact we saw one so quickly and the fact that we saw one on our own made us so happy. We walked in 2 trails in the forest and even though we didn't see other mammals during this day we still had some great times, we saw some *Rana aravalis* and *Zootoca vivipara* and even wolf's scat. During sunset we went to a forest clearing hoping to find some mammals, but we didn't score.

During the night we went spotlighting. Since a lot of time has passed, I don't remember when exactly we saw each species of mammal during the four days we went spotlighting. It was also very foggy which didn't help spotlighting, but generally: red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*) were common, we saw two badgers (*Meles meles*), one marten (*Martes sp.*) that was too quick to identify, a few foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), a hare (*Lepus europaeus*) and something that looks like a racoon dog but too distant to tell. There were tawny owls (*Strix aluco*) too.



On the 16th we did the Żebra żubra trail, which was fun but no mammals. Then we went during the afternoon to another forest clearing near Budy Lesne and on the way to the clearing I saw a glimpse what looks like a wild cat (*Felis sylvestris*), however I'm not so sure if it was truly a wild individual or domestic/hybrid. We didn't succeed with the clearing, but we did find some mammals during our spotlighting drive.



On the 17th we finally met Oliwier, he took us birding early in the morning and we found some nice species. He showed us a very impressive beaver dam and even managed to save my drone after it went down into the marsh because of some signal interference. On the way from the dam to the car we were lucky enough to see Elks (*Alce alces*)! A mother and a calf, it is not so common to see them in Białowieża and we were lucky. We also had some distant observations of red deer. During the afternoon we went to look for bison and it was very easy thanks to Oliwier's knowledge. At first, we saw a group of six just by the road, then we went further and saw a group of c. 30!!! It was amazing.





During the 18th there was terrible weather and Oliwier was kind enough to suggest we will not tour on this day, and he will give us an extra day instead. In the afternoon it got a bit better, so we drove to the bison in the same location as the day before and we found them! We stayed there for 2.5 hours and even though it was raining it was amazing.



On the 19th we went birding in Siemianówka and while we were driving through the forest, we saw a glimpse of a pine marten (*Martes martes*). In the late afternoon we went for a hike in the forest to look for woodpeckers, then

it became late and dark so we went back to the car. Oliwier said to us that this is a good time for mammals so we should look for them, then I joked about not wanting to meet a bison in the forest when it's so dark. Only a few minutes passed till we found ourselves standing in front of a bison mother and her calf... We started making some noise so it'll go away and luckily it worked, that was an experience I won't forget....

We began the 20th with a nice roe deer observation in the forest, then we went birding in a few areas while we drove towards Biebrza National Park.



Biebrza National Park, 20-22 Sep:

When we got there, we did a small trail and scanned for elks, however we found nothing except for a male (first male!) red deer that was so distant we saw only it's horns and started walking back.



We heard it calling since it is the rut season, and when we got to a clearing we stopped to see if it'll maybe come to show itself. We waited for a few minutes and the calls were growing louder and louder until this huge, beautiful deer with amazing antlers came outside and walked towards us to a distant of about 30m, then it noticed us and ran away. For sure a highlight!



At Biebrza we stayed at “Agroturystyka nad Biebrza Sośniaki” which was very nice.

We began the 21st with birding and while driving on the Tsar’s Road we found three elks! But no adult males with antlers... We wanted to see the bats in Osowiec Fortress (Jon Hall had some [very impressive observations](#) there) but the park’s office said it’s in military area and foreigners must ask for a permit in advance to go to there, I don’t know if regulations changed or maybe Jon had the permit. We went to one bunker which was open for the public and saw one 3 myotis individuals- two *Myotis daubentonii* and one *Myotis nattereri*.



We then went birding and saw some many roe deer in the fields near Krzecz and Karpowicze. During the evening we went to do the beaver boat tour in Wizna and when we got there the staff told us there were otters just passing by, so we go in the boat and searched for them and then we found them! In total three otters (*Lutra lutra*). After the otters it took a while but eventually we found beavers (*Castor fiber*), four individuals that did not care about us at all and gave a show.



On the 22nd we began the morning scanning for more elks, and we found a mother with a calf. During a tour around Maliszewo Meadows we found a hare and many roe deer. Our time in Biebrza and with Oliwier was coming to its end, we said goodbye to Oliwier and began traveling north-west. We were a bit disappointed about not seeing any adult male elks in Biebrza, but after 30 minutes of driving we almost crashed into one that crossed the road in front of us! It was thrilling. We also had a fox on the way.



Baltic coast and Warsaw, 23-26 Sep:

On the 23rd -25th we were in the Baltic coast; we had some quality birding there but except for one roe deer and a few distant views of grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) we didn't see any mammals. The seals are usually very visible and there some boat tours available but when we were there the weather was too rough.

The 26th was the last day in Poland, we didn't anticipate any wild mammal observations since we went to the zoo in Warsaw, however, when we were near the lion's exhibition I looked up and saw a funny looking bird, which was not a bird at all but a noctule (*Nyctalus noctule*)! There were quite a few of them fully active during the day. So amazing and weird.



Mammals list-

1. Striped field mouse (*Apodemus agrarius*)
2. European beaver (*Castor fiber*)
3. Red squirrel (*Scircus vulgaris*)
4. Northern white-breasted hedgehogs (*Erinaceus roumanicus*)
5. Bison (*Bison bonasus*)
6. Red deer (*Cervus elaphus*)
7. Roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*)
8. Elk (*Alces alces*)
9. Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)
10. Eurasian otter (*Lutra lutra*)
11. Grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*)
12. Pine marten (*Martes martes*)
13. Badger (*Meles meles*)
14. Wild cat? (*Felis sylvestris*)
15. European hare (*Lepus europaeus*)
16. Daubenton's bat (*Myotis daubentonii*)
17. Natterer's bat *Myotis nattereri*
18. Common noctule (*Nyctalus noctula*)

